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ABSTRACT

This study examined the child-rearing practices of 28 mothers of at-risk, school-based competent kindergarten students. The study investigated the role of home curriculum and learning in the success of the at-risk children. The mothers were interviewed regarding the nature of the home learning environment, the quantity of television viewed, the mother's involvement in formal education and the development of her child's positive self concept, parenting style, and social networks. The mother's emphasis on literacy skills is stressed as a factor in these children's success. Implications of the findings for parent school cooperation are considered. The findings are also considered in regard to countering stereotypes about black, inner city families. (Author/JPB)

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**Implications of a Study of the Child-Rearing Practices of
Mothers of School-Based Competent Kindergartners who are
Characterized as At-Risk.**

Frances Y. Lowden, Ph.D.

Rationale for the Study

Families create environments for learning. As first teacher, and first learning context, families play the central role in nurturing children. They are the diverse cultural carriers of specific knowledge valued by the specific family. The assumption that schools are successful primarily for children from strong backgrounds (Coleman, 1987), and that there are successful children characterized as at-risk, functioning as well as or better than those children devoid of such labeling, provided ample impetus for this article. The literature has shown a growing trend among researchers toward the use of a more holistic approach in the study of families. Effective families appear to exist and function in all socioeconomic and ethnic groups, whose children are academically successful.

The Study

The study examined the child-rearing practices of a selected group of 28 mothers of at-risk, school-based competent kindergarten students in a small inner-city North Carolina community. The study was concerned with seven questions regarding family process and content. This article

will focus on the question, "What is the curriculum of the home".

The Participants

The mothers were parents of five and six year old students characterized as at-risk who:

1. Had two or more risk factors, (low income, minority group membership, single-headed household, low educational level of the mothers, male gender), operating in their lives or on the lives of their family.
2. Met the promotion requirements.
3. Had been rated by their teachers on a school-based competency checklist as doing as well as, or better than, their peers who are devoid of the at-risk label. Data was collected through face to face interviews which, according to Goetz and LeCompte (1984), are common strategies used by qualitative researchers. Risk factors, which impact school-based competency, are defined as: a) low income; (b) household composition; (c) educational level of parents; (d) minority group membership; and (e) gender. School-based competency was rated in the domains of: (a) peer relations; (b) behavior; and (c) academic achievement.

Curriculum of the Home

According to Swick (1984), the educational role of parents is exemplified in their management of first the home setting, and later the school community contexts, as meaningful places for children to develop in

intellectually and socially skillful modes. He contends that during early childhood, parents involve children in many cognitive-perceptual developmental activities such as puzzle games, picture books, and everyday parent-child dialogue regarding objects and events in the home setting. Clark (1983) reports that the most promising research on the topic of families as educators, is taking a more holistic view of family units as producers of knowledge. He contends:

"My basic contention is that the family's main contribution to a child's success in school is made through parents' dispositions and interpersonal relationships with the child in the household. It is the family members' beliefs, activities, and overall cultural style, not the family units' composition or social status, that produces the requisite mental structures for effective and desirable behavior during classroom lessons." (Clark 1983)

Parents and children, as they function in the home environment, establish a great deal of social, emotional, and intellectual behavior that they will use once in the school ecology. The origin of school success is rooted in the home (Watson, Brown, & Swick, 1983). The importance of the spontaneous interactive element of the mother-child relationship to the child's growth, is stressed by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Findings

Seven questions were used to gather data to investigate the child-rearing

practices of these mothers:

1. What is the curriculum of the home?
2. How is the home organized to foster learning and responsibility?
3. To what extent is the quantity of television viewing monitored?
4. How is the mother involved in the child's formal education?
5. What does the mother do to help the child help develop a positive self-concept?
6. What parenting style is used by the mother in guidance, nurturing, modeling, and discipline?
7. What are the social networks which provide emotional, informational, and/or parental support?

The following questions and responses address the curriculum of the home:

1. How often do you read to your child each week?

The range of responses of the 28 mothers was a reading frequency of 0-7 or more per week. The most frequently reported responses were 1-2 times and 3-4 times per week.

2. How many times a month do you take your child to the library?

The range of responses of the 28 mothers was a library use of frequency of 0-4 or more times a month. The most frequently reported response was 0 times monthly.

3. How important do you feel school work is?

The range of responses of the 28 mothers was from important to very important.

4. What learning materials are available in the home?

Books, educational materials and drawing materials were reported by 100% of the mothers. Four of the homes have computers.

5. What are some of the home activities you did with your child that you think helped him/her prepare for entering school?

This open-ended question yielded data which are grouped in 15 categories. Reading was the most frequently reported home activity that mothers believed helped prepare their children for entering school. Other frequently given responses include teaching their children: numbers from one to ten, counting, recognition of the alphabet, writing his/her name, and recognition of colors.

6. What do you do to help your child to do well in school?

This open ended question yielded data which were grouped in 14 categories. Going over school work with the child was the most frequently reported home activity which mothers believe help their children do well in school. Other frequently reported responses were encouraging the child, talking to and listening to the child, and practicing skills.

7. Why do you feel an education is important?

This open-ended question yielded data in five categories. The most frequently reported response was that an education is important because it will help the child to get a better job. (Lowden, 1993)

Other aspects of the curriculum of the home addressed by the study were mothers' attitudes towards education, learning activities and content taught by the mothers, and available learning materials. The responses of most of the mothers indicated that they believe education is important because it helps one get a better job, and to prepare for life. This was reflected by their rating of school work as important. Reading to their children was the most frequently reported activity which was believed by the mothers to help prepare their children for school. Content taught by the mothers included numbers 1-10, counting, recognition of the alphabet, writing his/her name, and recognition of colors. Literacy is encouraged by providing books, educational toys, and materials for drawing, coloring, and writing. Strategies reported by most mothers, for helping their children do well in school, include going over school work, encouraging the child, talking to and listening to the child, and practicing skills. (Lowden, 1993)

Implications

According to Berger (1991), schools and parents face a challenge to work together to provide the necessary education and support that children need. The mothers of these school-based competent children hold the

school system in high esteem (Lowden, 1993). Mutual respect between home and school can foster better cultural and academic communication. As first teachers, mothers provide their children with the best practice that they themselves are comfortable with. If teachers want to extend, and/or enrich mothers' practices, they must first get to know the diverse backgrounds of their students. Many parents correlate school success with better employment. Most parents want the best for their children and, believe formal schooling is the means to this end. Schools can serve parents better by helping them set realistic goals. Parents need to know actually what it takes to become a member of the occupations that they desire for their children.

Literacy Emphasis

The mothers realize that reading is the key to learning. As evidenced in the study, reading is the most valued activity for 100% of the mothers interviewed. This has far reaching consequences. Many books and articles have been written about the importance of providing children with a print rich environment. This writer concurs and purports that teachers should write grants to provide books for children. Children need to own their own books so they can read and reread them. Since the majority of the mothers did not take their children to the library, lending libraries should also be made available. Parents should be encouraged to enroll in adult literacy programs. Teachers should provide parents with guidelines for

continuing to prepare and celebrate competent readers. Children enter kindergarten and first grade with great enthusiasm for reading and learning. Teachers should build on the reading experiences young children bring with them from the home. The best way to do this is to ask thoughtful questions. Mothers love to talk about their children and the things they are doing at home. Informal case studies can evolve. Trade books that children have seen, or heard read in their own home, should be made available in the classroom. Literacy programs should be strongly suggested to parents who are unable to read to their own children. Strategies reported by most mothers imply that they are doing the best that they know how to do. Teachers can broaden this framework to include those literacy behaviors that will continue to guide the young child to continue to meet the goal of successful school achievement. Though some mothers, characterized as at-risk, may be intimidated by schools, they uniformly imitate skills-oriented strategies that they perceive will give their children an advantage. Teachers can inform mothers of various strategies to use in going over homework. A telephone hotline to reciprocally communicate the process of the child can help develop rapport between teacher and mother. A short home visit can provide a rich repertoire of ways to link home and school.

Conclusion

The following hypothesis suggested by Neisser (1986), offers new perspectives on the school achievements of minority children. The difficulties encountered by minority children as a group do not result from any intrinsic intellectual incompetence on their part as suggested in the research of the 1960s and 1970s, but from the conditions of their lives, from their membership in a caste and a culture, from the inadequacies of their schools and their teachers, from the stresses they encounter in the present and the barriers they expect to encounter in the future. More recent black researchers believe, the demythologization of negative images about the black family, is an ongoing process that will probably continue for generations (Clark, 1983; Ford, 1983; McAdoo & Neisser, 1989). The research indicates that (a) at-risk parents can be and often are effective parents, (b) effective parenting practices may help to buffer stressors which impede academic and social progress, and (c) positive home environments, family processes, and content may influence the school-based competency of at-risk children. In this study, mothers viewed the school as the essential bridge to a successful future for their children. Teachers need to construct and reflect on ways of opening doors of communication, in order to best serve the needs of all of their students. Unfortunately, some of the successful kindergartners in the 1993 study began to be retained in the first grade, and were unable to rate on or

above grade level in subsequent years. This should be of major concern to parents and educators. These kindergartners were prepared for school success by their first teachers; their mothers. Yet after exposure to formal school settings, they began to fail to adequately perform according to school standards. Mothers of these children provided what they felt were requisite dispositions for learning, teaching practices, and home environments, to prepare their children for successful school achievement. Many of them were rewarded with a successful kindergarten year and many unanswered questions. Due to high mobility, this population of mothers is no longer intact. Few remain to be interviewed. Obviously, teachers cannot be expected to counter variables which are out of their control, but an effort must be made to strengthen the home environment, and the child-rearing practices of mothers characterized as at-risk.